

BLOOD FOR COAL LA Weekly, August 24, 2001,

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BODY:

Valmore Locarno Rodriguez and Victor Hugo Orcasita were riding in the company bus, returning home from their jobs at the Loma coal mine in northern Colombia. As the bus neared the town of Valledupar, 30 miles from the mine, it was stopped by 15 gunmen, some in military uniform, who began checking the workers' identification. When they came to Locarno and Orcasita, the two were pulled off the bus.

Locarno was hit in the head with a rifle butt. One of the gunmen then shot him in the face, as his fellow workers watched in horror from the bus. Orcasita was taken into the woods by the side of the road, where he was tortured. Later, when his body was found, his fingernails had been torn off. Locarno and Orcasita were singled out for a very simple reason: They were the leaders of a union local at the coal mine.

In Colombia, U.S. energy, military and trade policy are becoming intertwined, with devastating consequences, especially for that country's labor movement. The Bush administration justifies its multibillion-dollar military aid to Colombia -- the third-largest recipient of U.S. military aid in the world -- as necessary to suppress cocaine production. But much of that money supports activities by right-wing paramilitary groups, who in turn target trade-union leaders, according to documentation assembled by organizations including Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International. The U.S. is, in essence, sending massive military aid to one side of that country's civil war in the name of the war on drugs. In response, congressional supporters of human rights have made an annual routine of trying to derail Plan Colombia. But this summer, it was the debate over the Bush administration's energy policy, passed this month by the House of Representatives, that laid bare another reason why the U.S. is being drawn into the conflict in Colombia.

It's coal.

Bush-administration energy policies, which are now before the Senate, encourage the use of coal in U.S. power plants, and millions of tons are now being mined in the midst of Colombia's civil war by U.S. corporations. In fact, Colombia is one of the main sources for coal burned in many U.S. power plants.

The Loma mine, where the slain union leaders worked, is owned by a U.S. multinational corporation, Drummond Co. Inc., based in Birmingham, Alabama. Drummond opened the Loma mine in 1994, and it is now Colombia's second largest. Drummond clearly sees an interest in supporting a Bush-administration policy that encourages the increased use of coal in electrical generation. And it sees U.S. military intervention in Colombia as being in its interest as well. "We are in support of the Colombian plan and the U.S. efforts in the drug war," said Drummond spokesman Mike Tracy to independent journalist Stephen Jackson, whose report was published

in the Latin American Post.

But what's good for Drummond is not so good for its U.S. workers, or, more precisely, its former U.S. workers. Since 1994, Drummond has closed five mines in Alabama, laying off 1,700 members of the United Mine Workers, despite initial assurances that its business in Colombia would not affect U.S. operations. Drummond's one remaining U.S. mine employs about 500 workers.

Human-rights abuses in Colombia have a direct impact on U.S. workers and union members. A low-wage Colombian work force, its labor rights under attack and its union leaders murdered, gives U.S. companies a low-cost advantage in moving production there. And major corporations, including Drummond, Exxon and Occidental Petroleum, are taking full advantage.

Leading a union local often means losing one's job, even being blacklisted. In many countries, it can bring imprisonment by governments who view unions as a threat to the social and economic elite. But in some countries, election to union office carries even greater peril. And the most dangerous country by far is Colombia, where labor activism is often punished with death.

Even without assassinations, conditions for Colombian miners are some of the world's most dangerous. An April 27 blast at the Cana Brava mine in Santander province took the lives of 15 miners. In October 1997, an explosion buried 16 coal miners alive in El Diviso mine, near Cucuta.

The danger quotient rises even higher for those who try to improve the miners' working conditions. Slain union leaders Locarno and Orcasita had made repeated pleas to the company for protection. In a meeting just a week before the assassinations, the union demanded that Drummond provide security for its workers and that the company abide by a previous agreement allowing them to sleep overnight at the mine. The company allegedly ignored the agreement and refused to allow the men to stay.

Violence against unionists such as Locarno and Orcasita has become numbingly commonplace. By mid-May, 44 Colombian trade-union leaders had been murdered this year. Last year's killings cost the lives of 129. The National Labor School, a nongovernmental institute that supports the country's labor movement, reports that 1,500 have been killed in the past decade. Last year, out of every five trade unionists killed in the world, three were Colombian, according to a recent report by the United Steel Workers. While coal-mine-union leaders are particular targets of the paramilitaries, they're not the only ones.

On March 22, just days after the murders in Valledupar, two leaders of the Colombian electrical-workers union, Andres Granados and Jaime Sanchez, were gunned down. In mid-March, Eugenio Sanchez Diaz, a union activist in Colombia's key oil town of Barrancabermeja, was dragged from his home and shot in the street.

"Deaths due to political violence have roughly doubled from previous years," Massachusetts

Democrat John F. Tierney told fellow Congress members on the House floor in late July. "These are innocent people trying to make Colombia a safer and more prosperous place . . . This is not progress."

As New York Democratic Congressman Joseph Crowley put it, "Plan Colombia has bloodied the hands of this Congress."

On November 3, 2000, just days before the election, candidate George W. Bush told a West Virginia crowd that "Coal is going to help energize America."

But first it helped energize W.'s campaign. In July of last year, Drummond donated \$50,000 to the Republican National Committee and \$25,000 to the National Republican Congressional Campaign, and in October Drummond kicked in \$20,000 to the National Republican Senate Campaign. Overall, the coal industry dumped \$3.8 million into the 2000 elections and gave 88 percent of it to Republicans. In turn, the Bush campaign pursued an industry-friendly "cars and coal" strategy to win mining states.

It wasn't long before Bush rewarded this support. Shortly after taking office, Bush reneged on a campaign pledge to back mandatory reductions in carbon-dioxide emissions caused by coal-fired power stations. "That shouldn't be a surprise," commented Mike Buckner, a researcher for the United Mine Workers. "Bush comes from the state that is the country's largest consumer of coal, and Dick Cheney from the state that is the largest producer."

Bush's energy policy, which passed the House of Representatives on August 1, calls for building an additional 1,300 to 1,900 new electrical-generating stations over the next 20 years, the overwhelming majority of which will be fossil-fuel-burning plants. One result will be a vast increase in the consumption of coal, leading to an almost certain degrading of the nation's air quality. Events in Colombia, however, demonstrate that there's more at stake than environmental consequences. Bush never promised that U.S.-mined coal would be used in those new plants. Coal imports are already growing.

Last year, 5.5 million tons of Drummond's Colombian coal crossed the Alabama State Docks in Mobile. Most of it was bound for plants operated by the Alabama Power Company, a division of the Southern Company. (Southern is now familiar to California consumers under its new name, Mirant -- one of the out-of-state power generators selling electricity at exorbitant prices on the spot market.) The company's Alabama plants were formerly fueled by Drummond's U.S. mines.

Alabama used to export coal -- 13 million tons in 1996, mostly from Drummond mines. Last year, exports totaled only 3 million tons. At Colombia's Loma mine, in contrast, production rose 4 million tons in 2000, to a total of 11.8 million, after the company built a huge drag line -- a gigantic open-pit mining machine. The company expects to sell 15 million tons next year, and 25 million tons by 2006.

For Drummond, the transfer of operations from Alabama to Colombia has resulted in substantial savings on labor costs. A union miner in Alabama earns \$18 per hour, or \$3,060 per month, not

counting benefits. At the Loma mine, workers earn the equivalent of about \$650 to \$900 per month.

Drummond, noted United Mine Workers vice president Jerry Jones, transferred operations to Colombia "knowing that country's hostile political climate and egregious human-rights violations."

And Drummond is not alone.

The Cerrejon Norte mine is the largest open-pit producer in Latin America. Formerly state-owned, it is now operated as a joint venture by the government and Exxon Corp. In 2000, the mine produced 18.4 million tons of coal, half Colombia's total output, making it the largest export mine in the world. Half of that went to Exxon, which sold 17 percent of the coal to two southeast utilities -- the Jacksonville (Florida) Electric Cooperative and Mississippi Power.

After developing Cerrejon Norte in the mid-1980s, Exxon, like Drummond, began cutting its U.S. coal production. It closed a new mine in West Virginia and an older one in Illinois, and sold off operations in the Rockies. Exxon, which used to employ more than 1,600 U.S. miners, now employs just 321 people at its one remaining mine in Monterey, Illinois. Meanwhile, its Colombian operation now accounts for more than half the company's coal production worldwide.

The Colombian army provides security for Exxon at Cerrejon Norte from a military base just a few miles away, presumably using hardware supplied under Plan Colombia. The military has a history of involvement in labor disputes in the mine -- in the early 1990s, Cerrejon Norte was occupied by tanks after the government ordered the military to break a miners' strike.

Other U.S. energy corporations, such as Occidental Petroleum, depend on the Colombian army as well, to provide security at their oil fields. But this protection for corporate interests does not extend to the workers, and especially not to their union leaders. In fact, union leaders are frequently the targets of operatives linked closely to the military.

Responsibility for the murders of Locarno and Orcasita was laid at the feet of Colombia's rightist paramilitaries, the United Self-defense Groups (AUC), by the police commander for Cesar Province, Hugo Alfonso Cepeda. He told Colombian television network RCN that "It appears that it's attributable to paramilitaries who operate in the region." The AUC had issued a number of death threats against the leaders of the union at the Loma mine, accusing them of being in league with the country's main guerrilla group, according to Ken Zinn, North American regional coordinator of the International Federation of Chemical, Energy, Mine and General Workers' Unions.

The region has been the scene of intense conflict between the right-wing AUC and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC). The FARC allegedly levies a 10 percent tax on coal moving by rail out of the mine, which Drummond has refused to pay, and the 215-mile rail line to Puerto Drummond on the coast was bombed five times in the last year. In response, Drummond president Gary Drummond visited Colombian President Andres Pastrana last year

to demand increased protection.

"In the conflict a lot of assumptions are made quickly," said Rafael Albuquerque, who represents the International Labor Organization in Colombia. "One of those assumptions is that many union leaders support the guerrillas."

And union leaders are paying for this ideological presumption with their lives. Unionists blame the paramilitary AUC for almost all the trade-union assassinations. "The Colombian military and intelligence apparatus has been virulently anti-communist since the 1950s," said Robin Kirk, who monitors human-rights abuses for Human Rights Watch. The AUC and the Colombian military, she added, "look at trade unionists as subversives -- as a very real and potential threat. They see groups on the left as linked to the ideology that led to the formation of guerrilla groups."

The AUC is backed by some elements of the business elite behind the scenes. "There are powerful economic interests that support the paramilitaries," Kirk said, "and they do target trade unionists, and attack union leaders again and again."

These attacks against trade unionists occur in the larger context of violence against community leaders, human-rights activists and advocates for social change generally. According to the Colombian Commission of Jurists, 6,000 Colombians were killed last year as the result of social and political violence. The commission attributes 80 percent of the carnage to the paramilitaries, 5 percent directly to the government and 15 percent to left-wing guerrillas. "In the case of the paramilitaries, you cannot underestimate the collaboration of government forces," the commission's Roberto Molino recently told a delegation of U.S. unionists.

And while the guerrillas sometimes kill union members because they suspect them of collaboration with the AUC, "the paramilitaries kill them because they are trade unionists," said Kirk, the human-rights monitor.

To protest the killings of Locarno and Orcasita, 1,200 miners at Loma briefly stopped work, a response that only underscores why union leaders have been targeted. The Colombian government itself views union activity as a threat to its basic economic policies.

The administration of President Andres Pastrana is under pressure from the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank to cut the public-sector budget and sell off government-operated services and companies, which has resulted in mass terminations, along with cuts in funding for education, health care and pensions. Finance minister Juan Manuel Santos announced in January measures that would close many state agencies, laying off 42,000 workers. The money would be used instead to pay the country's debt to foreign banks and lending institutions, in the hope of making Colombia more attractive to foreign investors.

Unionists responded quickly. In March, the General Confederation of Democratic Workers organized a 24-hour strike of 700,000 workers, including 300,000 teachers and education employees, protesting mass layoffs. The Colombian Federation of Educators (FECODE) struck again on May 15, for 48 hours, over a proposal to cut the education budget by \$340 million. On

June 7, tens of thousands took to the streets in marches across the country, denouncing the International Monetary Fund. Health-care workers joined teachers in labor actions. Teachers-union president Gloria Ines Ramirez predicted that the cuts would deprive 500,000 Colombian children of an education, and 3 million people have already signed petitions opposing the funding reductions.

Being a teachers-union activist in Colombia is as dangerous as being a coal-mine-union leader. Since 1986, 418 educators have been murdered.

Similar struggles are sweeping the country over another International Monetary Fund mandate -- the privatization of government-owned industries. The union for workers at the government corporation EMCALI, which provides garbage disposal, water and electricity to Cali city residents, has fought the company's selloff. Union activist Carlos Eliecer Prado was killed in May. "Colombian trade unionists have been targeted by dark forces moving inside the state itself," a union statement warned.

In the days of the Cold War, American labor defended administration policies in Latin America and saw Colombian unions as dangerously radical. Today, unions such as the United Steel Workers are trying hard to break with that history. Human-rights abuses in Colombia, they assert, have a direct impact on U.S. workers and union members. And they are especially worried that U.S. taxpayer money funds a dirty war against all critics of the Colombian social and economic order, including unionists.

This spring, the United Steel Workers sent a formal delegation to Colombia in the wake of the murders of Locarno and Orcasita. The delegation met with leaders of the main Colombian labor federation. Upon the delegation's return, Steel Workers president Leo Gerard said at a press conference that "We are strongly opposed to the amount of military aid being sent to the Colombian army when trade unionists and innocent people are being killed by the very military forces we are financing."

On July 20, the Steel Workers and the International Labor Rights Fund went a step further -- into federal court in Miami. They charged the Coca-Cola Corporation, Panamerican Beverages (the largest soft-drink bottler in Latin America, with a 60-year history with Coke) and Bebidas y Alimentos (a Colombian bottling plant owned by Richard Kirby of Key Biscayne, Florida) with allowing paramilitaries to assassinate union leader Isidro Segundo Gil at the entrance of a Colombian soft-drink plant in 1996.

Many in Congress agree with the position of the Steel Workers. "Cutting funds from the Colombian military makes sense," said Janice Schakowsky (D-Illinois). "This is a military that has repeatedly been implicated in the brutalization and murder of the very people that it is supposed to protect."

The Steel Workers' stand follows a position taken by the AFL-CIO last year, which also called for ending military assistance. The federation picketed the Colombian embassy in April, condemning the murder of union leaders.

Labor's strong reaction to the Colombia murders stands in contrast to its relative silence during the Reagan administration--sponsored wars in Central America of the early 1980s. During that era, Cold War anti-communism led AFL-CIO president Lane Kirkland to suppress widespread criticism of U.S. foreign policy within union ranks, and to stop efforts from below to organize grassroots support for Salvadoran trade unionists during a period when they were being murdered by right-wing death squads.

During the Cold War, Kirkland and other labor conservatives accused most Colombian unions of being too left-wing. In turn, the Colombians, like many Third World labor federations, accused the AFL-CIO of supporting only anti-communist unions that defended U.S. foreign policy.

Today, U.S. unions want relations with all sectors of Colombian labor and use a single standard in calling for the defense of unions under attack. "Trade-union rights are human rights, and our union will fight to protect them everywhere," said Steel Workers president Gerard. "We demand that the Colombian government protect all trade unionists and do everything in its power to bring these assassins to justice."